

Dunbar Apartments, Matthew Henson Apartment
246 W. 150th St.
New York City
New York County
New York

HABS No. NY-5697-A

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118A-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

~~Admission to~~
MATTHEW HENSON APARTMENT
(Dunbar Apartments)

HABS No. NY-5697-A

Location: 246 West 150th Street, New York, New York County, New York
Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 18.589500.4519720
Present Owner: IES Corporation, 50 Union Avenue, Irvington, New Jersey
Present Use: Residential
Significance: As trailblazer for the arctic expedition led by Robert E. Peary, black explorer Matthew A. Henson became the first known person to reach the North Pole, April 6, 1909. Henson lived in Apartment 3F of the Dunbar complex from 1929-1955.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Dates of construction: 1926-28
2. Architect: Andrew J. Thomas
3. Alterations and additions: The buildings remain largely unaltered except for minor alterations to the parapet.

B. Historical Context:

The Dunbar Apartments, named after black poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, was Manhattan's earliest large garden apartment complex and the first large complex for blacks. Explorer Matthew Henson resided there from 1928-1955.

Henson's exploratory spirit was evidenced at an early age. Born in Maryland, he spent some of his younger years in Washington, D.C. before going to sea out of Baltimore as a cabin attendant at the age of 12. He was 18 when he started living ashore again, working at a variety of jobs along the East Coast. In 1887, he met Lieutenant Robert E. Peary while working as a stock clerk in a clothing store in Washington, D.C.

Although Henson's first job with Peary was that of personal servant, the lieutenant soon realized that his valet had many other capabilities. Henson drew on his sea experience and displayed natural ability as an explorer in assisting Peary on a number of expeditions. In the Arctic, Henson's facility with communicating with the Eskimos, dog sled construction and driving expertise, and general courageous resourcefulness were key to the success of the ventures.

Henson received very little recognition for his vital contribution to the success of the Peary Arctic endeavors until late in life. In 1950, President Truman saluted him in a ceremony at the Pentagon, while President Eisenhower honored him at the White House in 1953. Henson died in 1955 at the age of 88.

Matthew A. Henson was just one of the many famous black residents of the Dunbar complex. Other residents included poet Countee Cullen, editor W.E.B. DuBois, union official A. Philip Randolph, and dancer Bill (Bojangles) Robinson.

The architectural excellence of the project was recognized in 1927 when it was awarded First Prize for walk-up apartments in New York City by the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects. Taken as a model of what housing developments should be, the Dunbar Apartments influenced later Federal housing programs.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Dunbar Apartment complex consists of six u-shaped independent buildings containing over 510 apartments, with retail spaces on the ground floor. The buildings are clustered around a common courtyard which provides a substantial amount of light and air to each unit.
2. The buildings are in good condition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The buildings and grounds encompass over 150,000 square feet, approximately 50% of which is open space.
2. Walls: Primarily composed of varicolored dark Holland brick; ornamentation is of terra cotta

C. Openings:

1. Doorways and doors: There are eight exterior entrances, all surrounded by limestone arches. The main arched entrances on Seventh and Eighth Avenues include stylized bird sculptures which serve as corbels supporting a pedestal.
2. Windows: Eight-over-eight double-hung sash with wooden muntins, varying in size and placement

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The apartments come in one, two, three, and four bedroom styles.
2. Stairways: Surfaced in slate and lined with tooled brick
3. Flooring: Living rooms have oak parquet floors

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The complex occupies the entire block bounded by 149th and 150th Streets and Seventh and Eighth Avenues.
2. Historic landscape design: The large courtyard provides access to all the buildings. Paved walkways connect the arched entrances to the courtyard and central playground.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Dunbar Apartments, National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, 1979.

Dunbar Apartments (Matthew Henson's Residence), National Historic Landmark Nomination Form, 1974.

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